The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture
Author(s): Rayna Green
Published by: The Massachusetts Review, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088595
Accessed: 12-04-2018 03:10 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms
Retrospect & Prospect

only to the Great Spirit of the savages and to his own good deeds” (p. 439). But the Indian’s use of the providential theory is intended to exonerate the white settlers, not to inform us of his religious beliefs. And in the construct of historical foreordination the end was already appointed from the beginning of time, so that the means to the end will appear as nothing when compared with the force of God’s will.

By explaining his own and his nation’s extinction with a providential interpretation of history, “Chingachgook” relieves the settlers (and presumably the nineteenth-century reader) of moral responsibility. He offers the fiction that he is not the victim of evil deeds, and that the settlers are not the perpetrators of high crimes. Rather, both are the tools of historical necessity.

As “Chingachgook” nears death, Leatherstocking leaps out of nowhere to lead his young friends, Oliver and Elizabeth, to safety. In a significant act, Natty then lifts the dying Indian to his back, making graphic the psychological theme that has undergirded the novel—the Indian is the white man’s burden (p. 432). “Chingachgook” and all that he embodies dies, making it possible for the settlers to permit “John Mohegan” to live on. But pathetically, time is already working upon memory, for in engraving the Indian’s tombstone the names “Chingachgook” and “Mohican” are misspelled, leaving to history only “John Mohegan,” “Indian John” (p. 472).

☆

The Pocahontas Perplex: the Image of Indian Women in American Culture

by Rayna Green

In one of the best known old Scottish ballads, “Young Beichan” or “Lord Bateman and the Turkish King’s Daughter” as it is often known in America, a young English adventurer travels to a strange, foreign land. The natives are of a darker
Green Pocahontas Perplex

color than he, and they practice a pagan religion. The man is captured by the King (Pasha, Moor, Sultan) and thrown in a dungeon to await death. Before he is executed, however, the pasha’s beautiful daughter—smitten with the elegant and wealthy visitor—rescues him and sends him homeward. But she pines away for love of the now remote stranger who has gone home, apparently forgotten her, and contracted a marriage with a “noble” “lady” of his own kind. In all the versions, she follows him to his own land, and in most, she arrives on his wedding day whereupon he throws over his bride-to-be for the darker but more beautiful Princess. In most versions, she becomes a Christian, and she and Lord Beichan live happily ever after.

In an article called “The Mother of Us All,” Philip Young suggests the parallel between the ballad story and the Pocahontas-John Smith rescue tale. With the exception of Pocahontas’ marriage to John Rolfe (still, after all, a Christian stranger), the tale should indeed sound familiar to most Americans nurtured on Smith’s salvation by the Indian Princess. Actually, Europeans were familiar with the motif before John Smith offered his particular variant in the Generall Historie of Virginia (1624).

Francis James Child, the famous ballad collector, tells us in his English and Scottish Popular Ballads that “Young Beichan” (Child #40) matches the tale of Gilbert Beket, St. Thomas Aquinas’ father, as well as a legend recounted in the Gesta Romanorum, one of the oldest collections of popular tales. So the frame story was printed before 1300 and was, no doubt, well distributed in oral tradition before then. Whether or not our rakish adventurer-hero, John Smith, had heard the stories or the ballad, we cannot say, but we must admire how life mirrors art since his story follows the outlines of the traditional tale most admiringly. What we do know is that the elements of the tale appealed to Europeans long before Americans had the opportunity to attach their affection for it onto

---

Pocahontas. Whether or not we believe Smith’s tale—and there are many reasons not to—we cannot ignore the impact the story has had on the American imagination.

“The Mother of Us All” became our first aristocrat, and perhaps our first saint, as Young implies. Certainly, the image of her body flung over the endangered head of our hero constitutes a major scene in national myth (fig. 1). Many paintings and drawings of this scene exist, and it appears in popular art on everything from wooden fire engine side panels to calendars. Some renderings betray such ignorance about the Powhatan Indians of Virginia—often portraying them in Plains dress—that one quickly comes to understand that it is the mythical scene, not the accuracy of detail that moved artists. The most famous portrait of Pocahontas, the only one said to be done from life (at John Rolfe’s request), shows the Princess in Elizabethan dress, complete with ruff and velvet hat—the Christian, English lady the ballad expects her to become and the lady she indeed became for her English husband and her faithful audience for all time. The earliest literary efforts in America, intended to give us American rather than European topics, featured Pocahontas in plenty. Poems and plays—like James Nelson Barber’s The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage (1808) and George Washington Custis’ The Settlers of Virginia (1827), as well as contemporary American novels, discussed by Leslie Fiedler in The Return of the Vanishing American—dealt with her presence, or sang her praises from the pages of literary magazines and from the stages of popular playhouses throughout the east.2 Traditional American ballads like “Jonathan Smith” retold the thrilling story; schoolbook histories included it in the first pages of every text; nineteenth century commercial products like cigars, perfume and even flour used Pocahontas’ name as come-on (fig. 2); and she appeared as the figurehead for American warships and clippers. Whether or not she saved John Smith, her actions as recounted by Smith set up one kind of model for Indian-White relations that per-

---

Green ⫷ Pocahontas Perplex

sists—long after most Indians and Anglos ceased to have face-to-face relationships. Moreover, as a model for the national understanding of Indian women, her significance is undeniable. With her darker, negatively viewed sister, the Squaw—or, the anti-Pocahontas, as Fiedler calls her—the Princess intrudes on the national consciousness, and a potential cult waits to be resurrected when our anxieties about who we are make us recall her from her woodland retreat.3

Americans had a Pocahontas Perplex even before the teenage Princess offered us a real figure to hang the iconography on. The powerfully symbolic Indian woman, as Queen and Princess, has been with us since 1575 when she appeared to stand for the New World. Artists, explorers, writers and political leaders found the Indian as they cast about for some symbol with which to identify this earthly, frightening, and beautiful paradise; E. McClung Fleming has given one of the most complete explications of these images.4 The misnamed Indian was the native dweller, who fit conveniently into the various traditional folkloric, philosophical and literary patterns characteristic of European thought at the time.5 Europeans easily adopted the Indian as the iconographic representative of the Americas. At first, Caribbean and Brazilian (Tupinamba) Indians, portrayed amidst exotic flora and fauna, stood for the New World’s promises and dangers. The famous and much-repro-


duced "Four Continents" illustrations (circa, early 16th century) executed by artists who had seen Indians and ones who had not, ordinarily pictured a male and female pair in America's place. But the paired symbol apparently did not satisfy the need for a personified figure, and the Indian Queen began to appear as the sole representation for the Americas in 1575. And until 1765 or thereabouts, the bare-breasted, Amazonian Native American Queen reigned (fig. 3). Draped in leaves, feathers, and animal skins as well as in heavy Caribbean jewelry, she appeared aggressive, militant, and armed with spears and arrows. Often, she rode on an armadillo, and stood with her foot on the slain body of an animal or human enemy. She was the familiar Mother-Goddess figure—full-bodied, powerful, nurturing but dangerous—embodying the opulence and peril of the New World. Her environment was rich and colorful, and that, with the allusions to Classical Europe through the Renaissance portrayal of her large, naked body, attached her to Old World History as well as to New World virtue.

Her daughter, the Princess, enters the scene when the colonies begin to move toward independence, and she becomes more "American" and less Latin than her mother. She seems less barbarous than the Queen; the rattlesnake (Jones' "Dont Tread On Me" sign) defends her, and her enemies are defeated by male warriors rather than by her own armed hand. She is Britannia's daughter as well as that of the Carib Queen, and she wears the triangular Phrygian cap and holds the liberty pole of her later, metamorphosed sister, Miss Liberty (the figure on the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty dime). She is young, leaner in the Romanesque rather than Greek mode, and distinctly Caucasian, though her skin remains slightly tinted in some renderings. She wears the loose, flowing gowns of classical statuary rather than animal skins, and Roman sandals grace her feet. She is armed, usually with a spear, but she also carries

---

Green ★ Pocahontas Perplex

a peace pipe, a flag, or the starred and striped shield of Colonial America. She often stands with The Sons of Liberty, or later, with George Washington (fig. 4).

Thus, the Indian woman began her symbolic, many-faceted life as a Mother figure—exotic, powerful, dangerous, and beautiful—and as a representative of American liberty and European classical virtue translated into New World terms. She represented, even defended America. But when real Indian women—Pocahontas and her sisters—intruded into the needs bound up in symbols and the desires inherent in daily life, the responses to the symbol became more complex, and the Pocahontas perplex emerged as a controlling metaphor in the American experience. The Indian woman, along with her male counterparts, continued to stand for the New World and for rude native nobility, but the image of the savage remained as well. The dark side of the Mother-Queen figure is the savage Squaw, and even Pocahontas, as John Barth suggests in The Sotweed Factor, is motivated by lust.

Both her nobility as a Princess and her savagery as a Squaw are defined in terms of her relationships with male figures. If she wishes to be called a Princess, she must save or give aid to white men. The only good Indian—male or female, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacagawea, Cochise, the Little Mohee or the Indian Doctor—rescues and helps white men. But the Indian woman is even more burdened by this narrow definition of a “good Indian,” for it is she, not the males, whom white men desire sexually. Because her image is so tied up with abstract virtue—indeed, with America—she must remain the Mother Goddess-Queen. But acting as a real female, she must be a partner and lover of Indian men, a mother to Indian children, and an object of lust for white men. To be Mother, Queen and lover is, as Oedipus’ mother, Jocasta, discovered, difficult and perhaps impossible. The paradox so often noted in Latin/Catholic countries where men revere their mothers and sisters, but use prostitutes so that their “good” women can stay pure is to the point here. Both race conflict and national identity, however, make this particular Virgin-Whore paradox more complicated than
Retrospect & Prospect

others. The Indian woman finds herself burdened with an image that can only be understood as dysfunctional, even though the Pocahontas perplex affects us all. Some examination of the complicated dimensions of that image might help us move toward change.

In songs like “Jonathan Smith,” “Chipeta’s Ride” and others sung in oral tradition, the Indian woman saves white men. In “Chipeta’s Ride,” she even saves a white woman from lust-enraged Indian males. Ordinarily, however, she rescues her white lover or an anonymous male captive. Always called a Princess (or Chieftain’s Daughter), she, like Pocahontas, has to violate the wishes and customs of her own “barbarous” people to make good the rescue, saving the man out of love and often out of “Christian sympathy.” Nearly all the “good” Princess figures are converts, and they cannot bear to see their fellow Christians slain by “savages.” The Princess is “civilized”; to illustrate her native nobility, most pictures portray her as white, darker than the Europeans, but more Caucasian than her fellow natives (see fig. 1).

If unable to make the grand gesture of saving her captive lover or if thwarted from marrying him by her cruel father, the Chieftain, the Princess is allowed the even grander gesture of committing suicide when her lover is slain or fails to return to her after she rescues him. In the hundreds of “Lover’s Leap” legends which abound throughout the country, and in traditional songs like “The Indian Bride’s Lament,” our heroine leaps over a precipice, unable to live without her loved one. In this movement from political symbolism (where the Indian woman defends America) to psychosexual symbolism (where she defends or dies for white lovers), we can see part of the Indian woman’s dilemma. To be “good,” she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death.


6. Poster advertisement. Smithsonian Institution.

8. Princess. Cigar Store Figure, ca. 1865. National Gallery of Art.

9. Squaw. Cigar Store Figure. National Gallery of Art.
Those who did not leap for love continued to fall in love with white men by the scores, and here the sacrifices are several. The women in songs like "The Little Mohee," "Little Red Wing," and "Juanita, the Sachem’s Daughter" fall in love with white travellers, often inviting them to share their blissful, idyllic, woodland paradise. If their lovers leave them, they often pine away, die of grief, or leap off a cliff, but in a number of songs, the white man remains with the maiden, preferring her life to his own, "civilized" way. "The Little Mohee" is a prime example of such a song.

As I went out walking for pleasure one day,
In the sweet recollection, to dwell time away.
As I sat amusing myself on the grass,
Oh, who should I spy but a fair Indian lass.

She walked up behind me, taking hold of my hand,
She said, "You are a stranger and in a strange land,
But if you will follow, you’re welcome to come
And dwell in my cottage that I call my home."

My Mohea was gentle, my Mohea was kind.
She took me when a stranger and clothed me when cold.
She learned me the language of the lass of Mohea.

"I’m going to leave you, so farewell my dear.
The ship’s sails are spreading and home I must steer.”
The last time I saw her she was standing on the strand,
And as my boat passed her she waved me her hand.

Saying "when you have landed and with the one you love,
Think of pretty Mohea in the coconut grove.”
I am home but no one comes near me nor none do I see,
That would equal compare with the lass of Mohea.

Oh, the girl that I loved proved untrue to me.
I’ll turn my course backward far over the sea.
I’ll turn my course backward, from this land I’ll go free,
And go spend my days with the little Mohea.

Such songs add to the exotic and sexual, yet maternal and con-
tradictorily virginal image of the Indian Princess, and are reminiscent of the contemporary white soldier's attachments to "submissive," "sacrificial," "exotic" Asian women.

As long as Indian women keep their exotic distance or die (even occasionally for love of Indian men), they are permitted to remain on the positive side of the image. They can help, stand by, sacrifice for, and aid white men. They can, like their native brothers, heal white men, and the Indian reputation as healer dominated the nineteenth century patent medicine business. In the ads for such medicines, the Indian woman appears either as a helpmate to her "doctor" husband or partner or as a healer herself (fig. 5). In several ads (and the little dime novels often accompanying the patent medicine products), she is the mysterious witch-healer. Thus, she shares in the Caucasian or European female's reputation for potential evil. The references here to power, knowledge, and sexuality remain on the good side of the image. In this incarnation, the Princess offers help in the form of medicine rather than love (fig. 6).

The tobacco industry also capitalized on the Princess' image, and the cigar-store figures and ads associated with the tobacco business replicate the Princess figures to sell its products (fig. 7). Cigar-store Princesses smile and beckon men into tobacco shops. They hold a rose, a bundle of cigars, or some tobacco leaves (a sign of welcome in the colonial days), and they smile invitingly with their Caucasian lips. They also sell the product from tobacco packages, and here, like some of the figures in front of the shops, Diana-like or more militant Minerva (Wonder-Woman)-like heroines offer the comforts of the "Indian weed." They have either the rounded, infantile, seminaked (indicating innocence) bodies of Renaissance angels or the bodies and clothes of classical heroines (fig. 8). The Mother Goddess and Miss Liberty peddle their more abstract wares, as Indian Princesses, along with those of the manufacturer. Once again, the Princess comforts white men, and while she promises much, she remains aloof.

But who becomes the white man's sexual partner? Who
forms liaisons with him? It cannot be the Princess, for she is sacrosanct. Her sexuality can be hinted at but never realized. The Princess' darker twin, the Squaw, must serve this side of the image, and again, relationships with males determine what the image will be. In the case of the Squaw, the presence of overt and realized sexuality converts the image from positive to negative. White men cannot share sex with the Princess, but once they do so with a real Indian woman, she cannot follow the required love-and-rescue pattern. She does what white men want for money or lust. In the traditional songs, stories, obscene jokes, contemporary literary works and popular and pictorializations of the Squaw, no heroines are allowed. Squaws share in the same vices attributed to Indian men—drunkenness, stupidity, thievery, venality of every kind—and they live in shacks on the edge of town rather than in a woodland paradise.

Here, Squaws are shamed for their relationships with white men, and the males who share their beds—the "squaw men"—or "bucks," if they are Indian—share their shame. When they live with Indian males, Squaws work for their lazy bucks and bear large numbers of fat "papooses." In one joke, a white visitor to a reservation sees an overburdened squaw with ten children hanging on her skirts. "Where's your husband?" the visitor demands. "He ought to be hung!" "Ugh," says the squaw, "pretty well-hung!" They too are fat, and unlike their Princess sisters, dark and possessed of cruder, more "Indian" features. When stories and songs describe relationships with white men, Squaws are understood as mere economic and sexual conveniences for the men who—unlike John Smith or a "brave"—are tainted by association with her. Tale after tale describes the Indian whores, their alcoholic and sexual excesses with white trappers and hunters. A parody of the beautiful-maiden song, "Little Red Wing," speaks of her lewd sister who "lays on her back in a cowboy shack, and lets cowboys poke her in the crack." The result of this cowboy-squaw liaison is a "brat in a cowboy hat with his asshole between his eyes." This Squaw is dark, and squat, and even the cigar-store Indians show the changes in conception. No Roman sandals grace their feet, and their fea-
Retrospect & Prospect

tures are more "Indian" and "primitive" than even their male counterparts. The cigar-store squaws often had papooses on their backs, and some had corrugated places on their hips to light the store patrons' matches. When realities intrude on mythos, even Princesses can become Squaws as the text of the ragtime song, "On An Indian Reservation," illustrates.

On an Indian reservation, far from home and civilization,
Where the foot of Whiteman seldom trod.
Whiteman went to fish one summer,
Met an Indian maid—a hummer,
Daughter of Big-Chief-Spare-the-rod.
Whiteman threw some loving glances, took this maid to Indian dances,
Smoked his pipe of peace, took chances living in a teepee made of fur.
Rode with her on Indian ponies, bought her diamond rings, all phonies,
And he sang these loving words to her:
Chorus:
You're my pretty little Indian Napanee.
Won't you take a chance and marry me.
Your Daddy Chief, 'tis my belief,
To a very merry wedding will agree.
True, you're a dark little Indian maid,
But I'll sunburn to a darker shade,
I'll wear feathers on my head,
Paint my skin an Indian red,
If you will be my Napanee.

With his contact soon he caught her,
Soon he married this big chief's daughter,
Happiest couple that you ever saw.
But his dreams of love soon faded,
Napanee looked old and jaded,
Just about like any other squaw.
Soon there came papoose in numbers, redskin yells disturbed his slumbers,
Green ★ Pocahontas Perplex

Whiteman wonders at his blunders—now the feathers
drop upon his head.
Sorry to say it, but he’s a-wishing, that he’d
never gone a-fishing,
Or had met this Indian maid and said:
Chorus:

The Indian woman is between a rock and a hard place. Like
that of her male counterpart, her image is freighted with such
ambivalence that she has little room to move. He, however,
has many more modes in which to participate though he is still
severely handicapped by the prevailing stereotypes. They are
both tied to definition by relationships with white men, but she
is especially burdened by the narrowness of that definition.
Obviously, her image is one that is troublesome to all women,
but, tied as it is to a national mythos, its complexity has a spe-
cial piquance. As Vine Deloria points out in Custer Died For
Your Sins, many whites claim kinship with some distant Indian
Princess grandmother, and thus try to resolve their “Indian
problem” with such sincere affirmations of relationship.8

Such claims make it impossible for the Indian woman to be
seen as real. She does not have the power to evoke feeling as a
real mother figure, like the black woman, even though that
image has a burdensome negative side. American children play
with no red mammy dolls. She cannot even evoke the terror
the “castrating (white) bitch” inspires. Only the male, with
upraised tomahawk, does that. The many expressions which
treat of her image remove her from consideration as more than
an image. As some abstract, noble Princess tied to “America”
and to sacrificial zeal, she has power as a symbol. As the Squaw,
a depersonalized object of scornful convenience, she is power-
less. Like her male relatives she may be easily destroyed with-
out reference to her humanity. (When asked why he killed
women and children at Sand Creek, the commanding general of
the U.S. Cavalry was said to have replied, “nits make lice.”)

As the Squaw, her physical removal or destruction can be understood as necessary to the progress of civilization even though her abstracted sister, the Princess, stands for that very civilization. Perhaps the Princess had to be removed from her powerful symbolic place, and replaced with the male Uncle Sam because she confronted America with too many contradictions. As symbol and reality, the Indian woman suffers from our needs, and by both race and sex stands damned.

Since the Indian so much represents America's attachment to a romantic past and to a far distant nobility, it is predictable but horrible that the Indian woman should symbolize the paradoxical entity once embodied for the European in the Princess in the tower and the old crone in the cave. It is time that the Princess herself is rescued and the Squaw relieved of her obligatory service. The Native American woman, like all women, needs a definition that stands apart from that of males, red or white. Certainly, the Native woman needs to be defined as Indian, in Indian terms. Delightful and interesting as Pocahontas' story may be, she offers an intolerable metaphor for the Indian-White experience. She and the Squaw offer unendurable metaphors for the lives of Indian women. Perhaps if we give up the need for John Smith's fantasy and the trappers' harsher realities, we will find, for each of us, an image that does not haunt and perplex us. Perhaps if we explore the meaning of Native American lives outside the boundaries of the stories, songs, and pictures given us in tradition, we will find a more humane truth.

☆

714